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U.S. weighs effort to oust Panamanian

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WASHINGTON — Panamanian strongman Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega set off an attempt by some U.S. officials to seek his ouster when he spurned a direct request by a high American government figure to end his alleged involvement in a wide range of illicit activities, administration and congressional sources said Friday.

The sources said that last December, Vice Adm. John Poindexter, President Reagan's national security adviser, confronted Noriega with evidence gathered by the CIA of drug trafficking, gunrunning and efforts to circumvent U.S. trade embargoes on Cuba and Nicaragua, and urged him to "cut it out." They said the general ignored the request.

On his return to the United States, Poindexter reportedly began raising the possibility of finding an alternative to Noriega, who as chief of Panama's military is the country's effective ruler.

This opened a debate that is still going on at the highest levels of the U.S. government on a new Panama policy designed to force Noriega to relinquish power, the sources said.

They said the debate is the principal reason behind this week's flurry of stories in the American press linking the Panamanian general to illicit activities including the unsolved murder last September of a political foe, Dr. Hugo Spadafora.

Those stories, based on deliberate leaks of classified information by officials favoring Noriega's departure, have caused an uproar in Panama. The opposition newspaper La Prensa and legislator Antonio Arias of the opposition Panamanian Authentic Party have demanded the general's dismissal, while the pro-government paper Critica has defended Noriega.

U.S. Ambassador Arthur Davis was summoned by Panamanian Foreign Minister Jorge Abadia to discuss the furor. Panamanian officials said Davis was told of "our profound displeasure with these . . . accusations."

One source who favors Noriega's ouster said Friday that U.S. intelligence services estimated Noriega's personal wealth in 1982 at more than $16 million, most of it stashed away in secret bank accounts in Switzerland.

"He is in business on a whole range of intelligence and power activities for all sides," the official said. "He has been a double agent for us and the Cubans."

The New York Times reported Friday that in the early 1970s law enforcement officials in the Nixon administration proposed assassinating Noriega, who was then chief of military intelligence, as a partial solution to Panama's heavy drug trafficking.

Noriega became commander of the Panamanian Defense Force, then known as the national guard, when former strongman Omar Torrijos died in a plane crash in 1981. Noriega is widely believed to be the real authority in Panama, with much greater power than civilian President Eric Arturo Delvalle.

Some senior officials in the Pentagon and the State Department advocate a continuing relationship with the general, arguing that he has long been a valuable U.S. intelligence asset, sources said. These officials reportedly fear that he may retaliate by curbing or closing key U.S. military and intelligence installations in Panama.

A disruptive force?

But they noted that officials in the White House, the National Security Council and the CIA favor conveying to Panama that Washington wants Noriega removed on grounds that he is a disruptive force.

Sources said a consensus seems to be emerging among senior policy makers favoring change in Panama to ensure the long-term stability of the strategically located country, although it was not clear what steps they propose to get rid of Noriega.

The reason, the sources said, is that within 14 years the United States is to turn over the Panama Canal to Panama and so far the Panamanian government has done little to prepare itself and the nation to take over the waterway.

Some U.S. officials fear that Cuban or Soviet technicians could end up running the canal.

Several incidents are said to have contributed to U.S. dissatisfaction with Noriega. Among them:

- The overthrow in September of U.S.-supported civilian President Nicolas Ardito-Barletta.
- The murder by decapitation of Spadafora, a leading critic of Noriega, in September.
- Noriega's refusal in December to act on Poindexter's request.
- The breakdown last summer of negotiations between U.S. and Panamanian officials over a treaty that would give U.S. auditors access to secret accounts in Panamanian banks to trace drug profits.
- Rejection in March of a White House request to allow deposed Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos to resettle in Panama.

The September dismissal of President Ardito-Barletta, who had the full support of U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, appears to be the main source of friction, the sources said.

Critic decapitated

Ardito-Barletta's downfall came only a few days after Spadafora's decapitated body was found along the Costa Rican-Panamanian border, stuffed inside an old U.S. mailbag. His head was never found.

The U.S. official, citing recent intelligence reports from Panama, said Noriega "was likely involved" in the matter. Spadafora was reported last seen in the custody of the Panamanian military following reports he planned to make public evidence of Noriega's alleged involvement in narcotics smuggling.

U.S. officials said Ardito-Barletta got in trouble with Noriega precisely because he wanted to investigate Spadafora's death.

As a result of Ardito-Barletta's ouster, CIA Director William Casey, on a recommendation from the White House, commissioned a new study of Panama, the sources said.

Poindexter was armed with preliminary CIA findings when he met with Noriega in Panama, sources said. At the time f their

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meeting. Poindexter reportedly voiced concerns to Noriega about his influence on Panama's political system and urged him to relax his grip and allow the civilians to have a bigger say.

"Panama is the asterisk in the whole democracy plan of the administration for Central America," said one official. "We would like to say that all the countries in the Central American isthmus are democratic, except Nicaragua, and we can't say that now because of Noriega in Panama."

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